“Making the jump”: Eudora Welty and the Ethics of Narrative

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[Morality as shown through human relationships is the whole heart of fiction...] (Welty, Eye of the Story 148)

1 Eudora Welty has never made a secret of the fact that the propelling force behind her writing is love. When, during the 1960s, she was accused of lacking social consciousness and a political agenda, she responded by saying simply: “I think we need to write with love. Not in self-defense, not in hate, not in the mood of instruction, not in rebuttal, in any kind of militance, or in apology, but with love” (Eye of the Story 156). A dozen years later, she stated in an interview: “I never write stories or novels with the object of criticizing people. I want the reader to understand the people, and people as individuals. I’m not condemning people at all and never have” (Conversations 202). Finally, in 1980, we find her saying this about her artistic purpose: “I have been told... that I seem to love all my characters. What I do in writing of any character is to try to enter into the mind, heart, and skin of a human being who is not myself. Whether this happens to be a man or a woman, old or young, with skin black or white, the primary challenge lies in making the jump itself. It is the act of a writer’s imagination that I set most high” (Collected Stories xi).

2 Welty’s choice of metaphors is no less striking in her essays than in her fiction and “making the jump” is one of her most intriguing ways of figuring her own artistic process. This essay is an attempt to elucidate what that metaphor means in practice. What does it mean for Eudora Welty to make the jump? How does she do it? What strategies does she employ for coming to terms with otherness? Further: What does it mean for Welty to write with love? How does she love something while at the same time bringing into being? How does she avoid sentimentality? How does she guide our judgement?

3 The short answer to these questions is, of course, form. It is through the form of her stories that Welty loves; it is narrative technique that allows her to enter into the minds,
hearts, and skins of human beings who are not herself. Michael Kreyling writes in the conclusion to his monograph *Eudora Welty's Achievement of Order*: “In Welty's work the *how* is the *what*. Technique is its most fundamental aspect--its unique way of responding to the world and of expressing the impact of the world it meets--is what is given to the reader” (177).

Even after half a century of criticism, I feel we have work left to do in coming to terms with Welty's narrative technique, in understanding how the “how” becomes the “what.” I have chosen to call the sum total of narrative techniques and stylistic devices that constitute Welty's love in practice, an “ethics of narrative.” Herein lies an important distinction: The ethics of narrative is different from the ethics in narrative. In other words, every narrative has an ethics, but not every narrative is about ethics. I intend that the term “ethics of narrative” be understood to mean the study of the ethical aspect of narrative form. I choose to call this aspect ethical, because any formal choice within a communicative situation is value-laden. What is said comes into focus through what is not said. How a character or event is narrated may be highlighted through comparison with the means that have not been chosen. Whether or not the author is making systematic and ethical claims in or through her story, she cannot avoid making claims through the story's form. Who is given voice? Who is silenced? Who is characterized directly, who indirectly? Who is the focalizer? Who is focalized? What events are elided? What events are described scenically? Whose minds may we enter and whose not? How are these depictions of consciousness structured? As far as these choices guide us in determining our attitude to the novel's characters and events, they are ethical choices.

Based on the insights of poeticians of narrative such as Gérard Genette, Dorrit Cohn, Roger Fowler, and Boris Uspensky, I hope to indicate new ways of talking about the form of Welty’s stories. I particularly want to focus on how Welty maintains her distance, while at the same time creating sympathy for her characters. As she herself has stated: “Getting my distance, a prerequisite of my understanding of human events, is the way I begin work” (*One Writer’s Beginnings* 21). I will discuss Welty’s manipulation of narrative voice and perspective; her use of irony; her attempt to engage the reader, through the use of obstructionism and defamiliarization; her figurative language; and the role of metanarrative, including mind-style and coloring. I hope to show that for Welty, love and separateness are as much a part of the creative process as they are a reality in the created world.

Welty has never been afraid of tackling alien experience; individuals, scenes, and situations far removed from her own life. Consider alone the varied cast of protagonists she sets before us in her first published collection, *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* (1941): two poor young girls, who might be described as “simple-minded”; several middle-class matrons, spinsters, and roving bachelors; two deaf mutes; two mentally unbalanced ladies; an elderly, upper class, white man; several impoverished couples; two African American performers; an elderly African American woman; and two adolescent girls. With the exception of the character-narrator of “A Memory,” none of these figures can be said to have much in common with their creator, an unmarried, upper middle-class white woman of sound mind and body, writing about them during her late twenties and early thirties. In other words, in *A Curtain of Green*, we may observe Welty making some of her most daring jumps.

I have chosen as my exemplum the little discussed story entitled “A Piece of News.” Published in the *Southern Review* in 1937 and included in *A Curtain of Green* four years later,
it is among the briefest of Welty’s stories, but nevertheless exhibits a narrative complexity and sophistication that makes it representative of Welty’s short fiction to the extent that any single story by her may be called representative. It contains the emphasis on the detailed rendering of marginal characters, the lack of a conventional plot, and the dreamlike atmosphere that are typical of many of Welty’s stories. “A Piece of News” is also paradigmatic in that it embodies both of Welty’s central themes, as expressed by Granville Hicks: “the mystery of others and the mystery of self” and “the problem of what brings people together and what holds them apart” (72).

“What eye in the world did she feel looking in on her?” asks the narrator of “A Piece of News” (Welty, *Collected Stories* 13). This is one of the many direct and indirect questions raised by this deceptively simple narrative, depicting a scene from the life of a young country woman. The young woman is Ruby Fisher, willing of body and imagination, who comes home one day after an afternoon of infidelity and reads in the newspaper about a woman named Ruby Fisher having been shot in the leg by her husband. The rambling reverie that this reading sets off is the stuff of the story, as is what happens when dream meets reality, when Ruby is faced with the flesh-and-blood presence of her husband Clyde, rather than a romantic vision.

To tell Ruby Fisher’s story, Welty has chosen a narrator from outside Ruby’s backwoods world. The narrator immediately and irrevocably draws attention to her own disembodied presence by giving us a long scene where Ruby is entirely alone. No one sees her, no one hears her, but the narrator. The narrator has the power to interpret and to generalize about the myriad of actions Ruby performs, to speed up or slow down the telling of the tale, and to describe both people and things, often by comparing them with other things, directly through simile or implicitly through metaphor. We find the characteristically Weltyan similes; the simple and colloquial comparisons are taken from the same world as that of the story, as in the following example: “her hair began to slide out of its damp tangles and hung all displayed down her back like a piece of bargain silk” (12; italics mine). The modifier here is particularly apt, taking into account what we later learn about Ruby’s extramarital activities. Her hair is like a piece of silk, but it (and metonymically) its owner are not expensive. Further, we find: “She did not merely look at it [the newspaper]—she watched it, as if it were unpredictable, like a young girl watching a baby” (12-13). This makes us wonder how old Ruby really is. Is she a young girl or just like one? Also, the reference to the baby raises the question of why there is no child for her to love. Ruby’s movements are twice likened to those of a cat and this forms an interesting contrast to her birdlike voice: “a small fluttering sound” (12). Significantly, figurative expressions are not used about her husband Clyde, who is simply described as being “steamy” and “wet.”

Despite a certain homespun simplicity in its use of figurative language, there is something highly wrought about the surface of the story, which at times borders on the opaque. The narrator plays a vital and active role in the signifying process, watching Ruby with such care and attention that she comes to identify entirely with her needs. She describes Ruby’s movements in an indirect, abstract language, that we in turn must interpret. This is the mode of “must have been” and “seemed,” of “as if” and “as though.” Boris Uspensky was the first to identify these forms of “operators.” In his words: “The use of operators is a device which justifies the application of *verba sentiendi* to a character who has been consistently described from an external (estranged) point of view. We may call these operators ‘words of estrangement’” (85). What these words of estrangement
imply is that the narrator does not know if her conjectures are correct. They are connotators of restricted knowledge.

11 Uspensky has made a further observation on the type of narrative perspective Welty employs in “A Piece of News”:

The external point of view, as a compositional device, draws its significance from its affiliation with the phenomenon of ostranenie, or estrangement. The essence of this phenomenon resides primarily in the use of a new or estranged viewpoint on a familiar thing, when the artist “does not refer to a thing by its name, but describes it as if it had been seen for the first time--and in the case of an event, as if it were happening for the first time.” (131; quote from Victor B. Shlovsky’s “Art as Device”)

12 Naturally, this effect of estrangement is closely allied with the use of words of estrangement and the following passage from the final scene is a good example:

There was some way she began to move her arms that was mysteriously sweet and yet abrupt and tentative, a delicate and vulnerable manner, as though her breasts gave her pain. She made many unnecessary trips back and forth across the floor, circling Clyde where he sat in his steamy silence, a knife and fork in his fists. (15; italics mine)

13 In a delicate and ladylike manner the narrator is describing the sexual arousal Ruby experiences after her fantasy (Hollenbaugh 67). Ruby’s feelings are not in themselves unusual, but through the indirection of her description the narrator takes the reader on a process of discovery.

14 In other passages, the narrator holds back information to postpone our understanding of the significance of an action or description. As a consequence, our understanding is affected to the extent that we sometimes feel the narrator is actively getting in the way of that understanding. We see this obstructionist device clearly at the point in the first scene when Ruby suddenly jumps to her feet and screams for her husband (13; italics mine throughout): “‘You Clyde!’ screamed Ruby Fisher at last, jumping to her feet. ‘Where are you, Clyde Fisher?’” It is unclear whether the scream is one of fear, anger, or excitement. The narrator continues: “She ran straight to the door and pulled it open. A shudder of cold brushed over her in the heat, and she seemed striped with anger and bewilderment.” The narrator is now willing to give a tentative explanation. Then: “There was a flash of lightning, and she stood waiting, as if she half thought that would bring him in, a gun leveled in his hand. She said nothing more and, backing against the door, pushed it closed with her hip. Her anger passed like a remote flare of elation.” There is no longer any hedging, it was anger Ruby felt.

15 In her fine essay “Words Between Strangers,” Harriet Pollack comments on this phenomenon: “Welty’s style,” she says, “urges a reader to attend the text, to be a reader responding to a writer. Her ‘obstructions,’ paradoxically, are a measure of her apprehension for successful interaction with her audience” (69). The narrator of “A Piece of News” is not going to make anything easy for us, and we must make an effort at understanding Ruby Fisher equal to her own.

16 In this connection, Ruby’s monologue in the first half of the story is vital because it unites the two functions of metanarrative: The monologue has an explanatory function in that it allows us to understand the reality of Ruby’s present existence, and a thematic function in that it is an index of her loneliness. Having observed Ruby’s voice and movement in unison, the narrator (and the reader) are better equipped to interpret her body language
and to gauge her moods later in the story. We do not need to enter her thoughts, because Ruby in her childlike way lets everything show.

Ruby’s monologue has the peculiar quality that it is not related to us directly in the form of quoted speech, but indirectly in a mixture of the narrator’s and Ruby’s voice. Consider the following sample:

Clyde would have to buy her a dress to bury her in. He would have to dig a deep hole behind the house, under the cedar, a grave. He would have to nail her up a pine coffin and lay her inside. Then he would have to carry her to the grave, lay her down and cover her up (14-15).

If we did not know otherwise, we would think this was a summary of the thoughts going through her head. This is in fact a rather loose form of free indirect speech; what Dorrit Cohn calls narrated monologue (14 and passim). The narrator retains the content of Ruby’s narrative, but the standardized language, third-person reference, and “future in the past” verb forms indicate the narrator’s mediating presence. This is the narrator’s way of creating a more dreamlike effect and of creating a distance to the character, a distance which is to a great extent ironic.

Ruby’s monologue is a concentrated illustration of her “mind-style,” a term coined by Roger Fowler to denote “any distinctive linguistic presentation of an individual mental self” (103). Ruby’s mind-style is first and foremost distinguished by its simplicity and its lack of originality. This is reflected in the simple, repetitive sentence structure (e.g. “Clyde would have to buy her/dig her/nail her up/carry her”), and in the paired and often corny adjectives (“strange and terrible,” “handsome and strong,” “wild, shouting, and all distracted”). Her “soliloquy” reveals a penchant for melodrama and a longing for romance and its retelling in concentrated form serves to heighten its schoolgirl pathos.

If we look carefully we begin to notice other ironic touches, such as the following line in the middle of Ruby’s fantasy: “She lay silently for a moment, composing her face into a look which would be beautiful, desirable, and dead” (14; italics mine). The comic effectiveness of this line is due to the bathetic alliteration of “desirable and dead” and the incongruity of the grouping of these three qualities together. A different type of ironic effect is created by the sack of coffee being marked “Sample” in red letters. Again the joke is on Ruby, who has sold herself for nothing.

Despite these distancing devices, the narrator is remarkably in tune with Ruby’s feelings and the meanings of her actions. When Ruby is alone she is the object of the narrator’s external focalization; the reader does not see anything from Ruby’s perspective, spatially or cognitively. The narrator maintains her distance physically; she is only close enough to make out the fluttering sound of her voice in the emptiness of the room, and sometimes not even that: “‘The pouring-down rain, the pouring-down rain’—was that what she was saying over and over, like a song?” (12). Sometimes she comes so close as to look with Ruby, usually at the rain outside: “She moved slightly, and her eyes turned toward the window. The white rain splashed down” (15).

From the beginning of the second scene, we notice a subtle change in the code of focalization. This is first signalled by Clyde’s appearance out of nowhere, like the phantom-lover of Ruby’s dream, come to wreak his vengeance. This change in focalization does not so much mean that we are now seeing Clyde consistently from Ruby’s perspective, but rather that the narrator evinces a sympathetic willingness to see Clyde in the role of the wronged husband, driven by passion to murder his faithless wife. The narrator is willing Clyde to be what Ruby wants him to be. He is depicted as a large,
wet, massive figure, growling for his supper and he even asks the crucial question: “Well, where have you been, anyway?” in a grumbling tone of voice (15). Yet the narrator cannot be untruthful, she cannot suppress the fact that Clyde, far from harming Ruby with the gun, only pokes her with it, that he has “a stunned, yet rather good-humored look of delay and patience in his face” (15), and that the question is asked not as a challenge, but with accustomed amusement: “He almost chuckled” (15). The ludicrousness of Ruby’s hopes becomes painfully clear to us, while she herself is oblivious to the jarring discrepancy between fact and fancy and wanders about in a mood of heightened sensual pleasure.

In the climactic scene, right after Ruby has shown Clyde the newspaper notice, we again have a passage touched by Ruby’s romantic fantasy, and not without elements of her melodramatic imagination:

He looked up, his face blank and bold.

But she drew herself in, still holding the empty plate, faced him straightened and hard, and they looked at each other. The moment filled full with their helplessness. Slowly they both flushed, as though with a double shame and a double pleasure. It was as though Clyde might really have killed Ruby, and as though Ruby might really have been dead at his hand. Rare and wavering, some possibility stood timidly like a stranger between them and made them hang their heads. (16; italics mine)

“Blank and bold” is a cliché taken right out of Ruby’s idiom, and reminds us of her adolescent description of Clyde as “handsome and strong” (14). The pairs of adjectives seem inflated and trite and appear to belong to the same register as the “beautiful, desirable, and dead” of Ruby’s monologue. What we are observing here is the phenomenon called “coloring,” through which “the narrator’s language reacts to the language and the structure of consciousness of the characters” (Fowler 78). The narrator has not adopted Ruby’s visual perspective, but rather her mind-style. The passage is full of the type of “infinite significance” Ruby is longing for.

We are not allowed into Ruby’s and Clyde’s minds, yet we know the penultimate sentence in the quoted passage is based on a fantasy that is solely Ruby’s. She has had a vision of how things once were and of how they might be, that Clyde has not. Thus I cannot agree with the critics who take this scene as evidence of how both Ruby and Clyde, for a brief moment, have a flash of insight and see each other in a new light. Ruth M. Vande Kieft writes that “For an instant they have had a vision of each other in alien fantasy roles--an experience which is pleasing, exciting, and rather frightening” (45). W.U. McDonald, Jr. observes that “the possibility of the fatal shooting exists in the minds of both of them for a moment before common sense again prevails” (233). More recently, Jan Nordby Gretlund has written that “There is a moment when husband and wife have a chance to bridge the gap between them,” and “it works as a confirmation that Ruby and Clyde need to be able to go on together” (115, 116). Even Dawn Trouard, author of the most riveting reading of the story to date, writes of “an epiphanic moment... that takes into account the possibility of murder, death, agency, and consequence,” though she adds in a footnote her suspicion that “the ‘rare and wavering’ possibility that rises up between Ruby and Clyde... is totally unassigned and indeterminate” (343, 353 n. 7).

What these critics forget is that the newspaper item is about a woman being shot in the leg, not being shot through the heart. Unless Clyde has extra sensory perception, there is no way his and Ruby’s minds could meet at this point. Clyde can have no idea of what the newspaper item has triggered in Ruby’s consciousness. To him it is all just an unconceivable mistake, which is cleared up to his complete satisfaction when he
discovers the paper is from Tennessee. The only possibility that stands wavering between
them, whether the narrator is willing to admit it or not, is the strong possibility that the
couple is hopelessly mismatched and that they will never understand each other.

Through the great number of words of estrangement, conjectural descriptions, and
tentative assertions, the narrator abdicates her right to the final word and leaves it up to
the reader to interpret the signs in such a way that he or she feels is coherent with the
depiction of the characters up to that point. There is no reason to believe that Clyde
should suddenly experience a quantum leap of understanding and intuit the fantasy
awakened in Ruby by the newspaper item. The reason why so many critics seem willing to
believe that Ruby and Clyde experience a moment of mutual revelation and communion
is that the narrator seems to want to believe it. As we have just seen, this belief is not
logical. The narrator has allowed herself to be carried away by her love for Ruby.

In “A Piece of News,” defamiliarization and distance go hand in hand. In a story such as
this, where an intellectual narrator tries to understand a semiliterate woman, there is
bound to be distance on many planes. We have seen it on the spatial plane, where the
narrator is an “invisible witness” who keeps her physical distance. We have seen it even
more clearly on the linguistic plane, where we have the opportunity to distinguish the
narrator’s estranged, indirect voice from Ruby’s plain, homegrown idiom, before the two
merge. The narrator’s figurative expressions also create a distance; they do not state
what things are, just what they are like. We have also noted that Ruby’s thoughts are
never related to us, directly or indirectly. Yet morally and emotionally there is no
distance. The closest the narrator ever comes to judging Ruby is her comment early on
that Ruby “must have been lonesome and slow all her life, the way things would take her
by surprise” (12). It is important for the reader to understand that Ruby cannot be judged
by the standards we apply to normal, “rational” beings. On the emotional level, there is
identification to the extent that the narrator begins to fantasize herself.

In her attempt to “come to terms” with the identity of a simple, even simple-minded
young country woman through the minute observation of her every move, word, and
gesture, the narrator of “A Piece of News” enacts a process of observation, understanding,
and sympathy that we may call love. It is a measure of this love and the story’s supreme
irony, that the narrator is the only one to see Ruby as she wants and needs to be seen, on
her own terms, however melodramatic they may seem to us. For Ruby is a performer—a
performer without an audience. No matter what she may feel, there is no one watching
Ruby Fisher.

“A Piece of News” is a vivid illustration of what Welty has described as her “continuing
passion,” her wish “not to point the finger in judgement but to part a curtain, that
invisible shadow that falls between people, the veil of indifference to each other’s
presence, each other’s wonder, each other’s human plight” (Eye of the Story 355). In this
and many other stories, we admire her daring in writing about people and parts of life
which are far removed from her own personal experience. Yet, as Wayne Booth has
pointed out: “It is not the degree of otherness that distinguishes fiction of the highest
ethical kind but the depth of education it yields in dealing with the 'other'” (Company We
Keep 199). In the words of Lynne Tirrell: “The experiences most worth having and the
experiences recorded and perpetuated are not those of the characters within stories but
rather those of the artist” (124). Ultimately, it is the form of Welty’s story—its enactment
of love—rather than any abstract moral principles we may want to draw from it, that
constitutes its contribution to ethics in general and to the ethics of narrative in particular.

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


NOTES

2. There are of course ethical dimensions to the narrative text that are not of a structural nature; first and foremost, the actions of the characters themselves. It is the discussion of the epistemological status of fictional events and their evaluation as a basis for ethical arguments—the ethics in narrative—that is at the center of much current work within the “ethics of fiction.” In due time we may want to examine the ethics in Welty’s stories, but we must always keep in mind that in a text there are no actions in themselves; all is language. Thus any evaluation of a narrative’s ethical stance must begin with the analysis of the ethics of narrative representation in the work.

3. Peter Schmidt appears to have endowed Ruby with children when he describes her as “a vigilant mother” (35), but I can find no evidence in the story that she and Clyde have offspring.

4. Wayne Booth has also given an interesting description of this type of rhetoric in his *The Rhetoric of Fiction*: “Modern authors have often managed to give an acceptable air of objectivity while reaping all the benefits of commentary, simply by dealing largely with the appearances, the surfaces, while allowing themselves to comment freely, and sometimes in seemingly wild conjecture, on the meaning of those surfaces.” He uses Faulkner’s *Light in August* to exemplify this form of “conjectural description” and concludes: “This device may for some readers serve the general realistic demands—it is ‘as if’ the author really shared the human condition to the extent of not knowing for sure how to evaluate these events” (184).

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